

HOSPITAL SHIP MERCY SAILS OFF TO NEW COOPERATIVE MISSION

By Jane Morse
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WASHINGTON, MAY 18 -- The U.S. Navy ship Mercy -- which acquitted itself admirably after the tsunami that hit Indonesia -- has embarked on another humanitarian assistance mission in the Asia-Pacific region.

Having left San Diego April 24, the Mercy is on a five-month deployment that will take her to the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh and East Timor.

This time, however, she will be carrying not just military personnel but civilians from several nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) as well.

During a May 10 briefing in Washington, Admiral Gary Roughead, commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, told reporters: "I think perhaps the most unique aspect of this mission is that Mercy and her military professionals are being joined by nongovernmental organizations."

The U.S. Navy has worked with NGOs during crises in the past, he said. "This, however, is a premeditated and proactive partnership, not initiated by crisis but simply by a desire to assist our neighbors. I believe that this model of cooperation and deliberate planning with the NGOs and the nations that are participating is the way of the future."

The admiral said the first phase of the operation in the Philippines will involve two different NGOs onboard the Mercy -- the Honolulu-based Aloha Medical Mission and Project Hope.

According to Roughead, there will be six additional Philippine NGOs participating from the shore that will utilize the Mercy's facilities. Arrangements are being made for even more NGOs to participate in other phases of the operation, he added.

"I believe that this opportunity will achieve the refinement of the interagency and international operating procedures, standard operating procedures, for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief that began last year with the post-tsunami relief efforts," Roughead said.

In addition to the NGO personnel, the 900-foot-long Mercy is carrying a U.S. military medical team, two H-60 helicopters, Navy construction engineers and representatives from the U.S. Public Health Service.

Roughead said the group represents an interagency, international and multispecialized team of medical professionals capable of providing a wide range of services onboard and ashore.

"It's an unprecedented group of volunteers and professionals, civilian and military men and women," the admiral said. "They are dedicated to saving lives and restoring hope and spreading good will."

The medical capability that Mercy will bring to the region includes basic medical evaluation and treatment, dental and optometry screenings, eyewear distribution, preventive medicine treatment, general and ophthalmology surgery, public health services and even veterinary services. The Mercy team is prepared to administer to medical and humanitarian assistance needs through medical, dental, civic and construction action projects, the admiral said.

"The Mercy deployment is a demonstration of U.S. commitment to the region and of the commitment to the people of the region with whom we share common bonds as stakeholders in the Pacific," Roughead said.

The admiral emphasized that the Mercy deployment is focused on needs expressed by the host nations involved. A number of non-host nations, however, are supporting the Mercy's interagency and international team effort.

"Canada is providing some dental professionals," Roughead said, "and both Australia and Singapore plan to send teams during various periods of the mission."

Roughead explained that as Mercy moves from location to location, there will be changes in the participants from the individual NGOs as well as the NGOs themselves.

"Many of the volunteers who serve with the NGOs are only able to do this for short periods of time, so there will be a constant changing of the NGO personnel onboard the ship," he said. "And we have worked very closely with the NGOs and host nations to facilitate that exchange of people. ... They'll spend some time in a particular area and then they'll go back to their normal occupation."

In the aftermath of the tsunami that hit Indonesia and other parts of Asia on December 26, 2004, the Mercy was deployed to Aceh, Indonesia, and then Nias Island. During that deployment, the Mercy team treated more than 107,000 patients, the admiral said. They also performed 466 surgeries, 6,000 dental procedures, tens of thousands of medical procedures and distributed more than 4,000 pairs of eyeglasses. (See related article (<http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/Archive/2005/Mar/05-433015.html>).)

"For the U.S. military, it was our largest relief operation since the Berlin airlift," Roughead said. "And for the U.S. military, it was our biggest involvement in Southeast Asia since Vietnam."

"It was an incredible demonstration of just what is achievable when we all work together for the betterment of the human condition," the admiral said.

See also, U.S. Response to Tsunami
(http://usinfo.state.gov/gi/global_issues/recovery.html).

More information on the Mercy (<http://www.mercy.navy.mil/>) is available on a Web site for the U.S. Navy ship.

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GR/ 2006

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